

[Italian Feed]

Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite

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ITALIAN FEED

The woman was sitting at the kitchen table feeding small pieces of meat, onion, garlic and spinach to a food grinder. She was well over fifty. As she spoke and worked, her long gold earrings bobbed and swung.

"I'm getting a dinner ready for a party of twelve people. All from Montpelier. Not Italians. Italians know how to make their own Italian dinners. These are Americans. In the winter I get about two orders a week for good-sized dinner parties. In the summer, not so many. They like to get out then in their cars and stop at different places to eat."

She had finished grinding the food. It was a soft brown-green [mass?]. This she seasoned with salt, pepper and crushed mint leaves.

"This is the filling for the ravioli," she said. "Always they want ravioli for their dinners, and some want spaghetti at the same meal. Me, I think it is foolish to have both at the same dinner. They're almost the same except that the ravioli are stuffed. But if that's what they want— me, I don't care. I means more money for me—"

She cleared the table and tacked a heavy white oilcloth over it. She rolled to a very thin sheet a rather stiff pastry made of eggs, flour and mashed boiled potatoes.

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"I been doing this kind of work for ten years or so. Since my husband died. Quite a few women in Barre earn money this way.

"It's a funny thing — In Italy I was always too busy to think much of food. I lived in the Lake Como district up north. Our house was on a hill outside the city. My two sisters and me would go to the city every 2 day to work in the mills. Silk mills. We were so hungry at noon we were satisfied with any kind of food. We carried our lunch with us. Polenta and cheese tasted as good to us then as chicken does today. We like good food, but we were always too busy and didn't have enough money to eat only the simple food. Over there it seems funny to be cooking meals for people who got no more money than me. It's in the last ten years that American people have been asking for Italian food."

The woman had finished rolling the pastry to a thin sheet. Now she cut it in diamond shapes about an inch wide.

"Many Italian women have machines to make these raviolis," she said. "I haven't got one. They're quite expensive [?] and anyway, I'd rather make them by hand."

On each diamond of pastry she placed a teaspoonful of the ground food. she flapped the end of the pastry over this and pressed it to the lower half with a fork. The finished ravioli were V shaped — like the flaps of envelopes. "They look better when they're made by machine," she said. "But they taste the same.

"We always made them this way in the old country, we never had any machines to help us. Our fingers were the machines. I never saw the machines until I came to this country. I came over when I was eighteen years old. I wasn't married then. I came over here to marry Pietro [Bartoletti?]. I grew up with Pietro. I went to school with him. We were always good friends in the old country. He came over here to work in the sheds. Every month I got a letter from him. He told me how good the granite business was. He asked me to marry him, so I wrote back yes. I came over here in August. I liked Barre. It didn't seem

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strange to me. 3 We were married right away. And right away a great many people came to visit me. Italian people. Not many I know. But all Italian people from the north of Italy who spoke my Italian and lived the way I lived. I had no time to be lonesome.

"My Pietro, he worked in the sheds for fifteen years. Always he was not satisfied. Always he said some day he would find other work. But no other work he found. He stayed in the sheds until he died. He caught a bad cold one winter. The doctors, they all said his lungs were already weak. He couldn't stand the added sickness. He died."

The woman set down the rolling pin. She folded her arms and sighed. "Well, I was with four children, all young enough to be in school, so I said to myself: you got to earn some money, [Melicenda?]. You got to earn a little money to add to the insurance money Pietro left. So I started to cook meals for these American people. They lik- Italian food and they pay good money for it. It was work I could do at home, so I tried to get as many orders as I could.

"One Italian woman, a friend of mine, does the Italian cooking for one of the restaurants; but me, I don't want to bother with that. I got enough to do. I got one girl in her last year at high school. I got to keep the house for her.

"The other three children are married. The boy is in the printing business in Boston, and the two girls both live outside the State. They were both married before they were out of high school three years. I'm glad for them. They got nice homes and they are happy. I'm happy they didn't marry stonecutters. Always with them it is worry, worry. Worry about their health; and worry about how many days a week they work. No 4 matter how good looking a man is or how good he is, I never would say to a girl: marry him this stonecutter. No, less than twenty years I had with my Pietro. That is too little.

"The girls, they didn't like it when I started to get meals for Americans. They said, 'You are as good as they are, why do you get dinners for them?' They didn't understand much about money then. They didn't know that you have to work to make a living. They learned

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soon, soon. They worked three years after they were out of high school, they learned it took money to live. Libera, the youngest girl, doesn't mind. Some times she helps me wait on table. She even helps me get the meals, it's different now! People don't look down so much on how you earn your money. It's a good thing. Everybody's got to live one way or another.

"After Pietro died I had to figure a way to live. I said to myself: I have the house - small as it is, it's mine and all paid for. I have a little insurance money, but there are four children. I got to make that money stretch. So I began taking orders for dinners. And sometimes if the neighbors were sick - but not sick enough for real nurses- I took care of them. They liked someone who spoke their own tongue. I don't do much nursing now. It's different. Many Barre born Italian girls have graduated from our hospital. They know twenty times more about nursing than I do, and they speak Italian well enough to understand the patient.

"I like to work like this— here in the house. I know where every pan is hung, where every spice is kept. Sometimes my customers want me to cook in their own homes. Well, I do not refuse, but I charge them more."

She had finished cutting and pressing together the last of the ravioli. She sprinkled them lightly with white cornmeal and placed them on a long 5 board to harden.

The kitchen was small. Six plain, sturdy chairs and a heavy round table almost filled the room. A coal fire burned in the stove. Beside the pantry door was a doorstep of granite - a polished gray ball of granite.

The woman said, "My husband made that doorstep. I got two more upstairs. One I gave to my daughter in Massachusetts. Pietro used to take home [?] odd pieces of granite that I could use around the house. I still have some thin, flat pieces -just grout- that I use in the fall when I make pickles. I put them on the cucumbers to hold them down in the brine. Once he made me a knob of granite, a little bigger than this-" the woman held up a clenched fist, "he made it smooth and put a handle on it. I used it to pound steak. One day

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the youngest boy took it out in the yard to hammer a nail in his cart. It split. I haven't got another one. I miss it.

"You want to see where my customers eat?" the woman asked. "Right in here."

The dining room was but little larger than the kitchen. The walls were covered with a golden brown paper almost the same shade as the oval table of oak. Afternoon sunlight spilled through the two windows, giving warmth to the bareness. The room was [scrupulously?] clean.

Melicenda said, "I don't bother to fix the table pretty. I figure my customers come here to eat, not to look at my table. Oh, I fix the food fancy so it will look good to the eyes, too. And I give them plenty. That's what they pay for.

"I charge them \$1.25 each. That isn't too much. First I serve them a big platter of stuffed celery, thin slices of salami and mortadella, ripe olives, and pickles. Then the ravioli with a rich tomato sauce. If they 6 want spaghetti, too," the woman shrugged resigned shoulders, "Well, I give them the spaghetti as well. The little Italian rolls are good with ravioli. I don't make them myself. I buy them from the Italian baker down the street. Just before it's time to serve the dinner, I sprinkle them with milk and put them in the oven for a few minutes to heat them. Dessert, no. I never serve dessert. The ravioli are so rich that I make them a dish that will cut the richness. I give them a salad of lettuce, endive, tomato, onion, celery, mixed with vinegar and olive oil. I use the wine vinegar. It gives a better taste to the salad. With the dollar and a quarter dinner I serve just one glass of red wine. If they want more they got to pay for it.

"Tonight my customers will get here at seven o'clock. They won't leave until eleven. I know. They have been here before. It is a crowd of young people who work in offices in Montpelier. They will drink about five dollars worth of wine before they go home.

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Sometimes one or two of them bring a pint of their own whiskey. They want to drink it here. Well, I don't refuse. But it's not so much profit for me when they don't buy my wine.

"You know what happened to a friend of mine last summer? She is a woman my age, and she earns a living getting dinners like I do. She got a dinner for sixteen people. A fried chicken dinner she charges \$1.50 for. Well, not one of those sixteen people bought wine. Not one glass. They drank whiskey they had brought with them. About half-past ten policemen, come in the house — three of them, to raid it. Well, they go down cellar and they find the same kind of whiskey that is on the table. They want to arrest the woman. She says no, that she hasn't sold any. Her customers, they all say no, too. Well, the police can't prove that she sold it. They don't do anything to her. But after that they watch her close. She doesn't do much business now. She's afraid to sell wine.

"Why don't the police leave us alone? We got to make a living. We hurt no one. I know it's against the law. But just the same it's an honest way to live. There are worse ways of making a living and the law says nothing about it. I never been raided, maybe some day I will. Then I will lose customers. I will have to be extra careful about the people I sell wine to."

Melicenda smiled. "Well, any time you want a good Italian feed, call me up. My name is in the telephone book. Just call Melicenda Bartoletti."